

My Comic History (Part 1)

By Karen Green

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In the beginning was *The New Yorker Album, 1925-1950*.

Well, in MY beginning, anyway. My parents had this big, folio-sized volume on their lower bookshelves, and when I was seven or eight years old I started taking it down and looking through it. Didn't we all have books like this? Fascinating, entertaining tomes we'd haul out every couple of months and go through again? Books that maybe weren't necessarily age-appropriate? (Full disclosure: I'm talking about the mid- to late-1960s, when there weren't nearly as many books or games targeting my age range. Don't even get me started on how I began reading the folks' collections of Robert Benchley and James Thurber when I was around nine years old.)

Anyway, *The New Yorker Album*. It was broken into five sections: the late '20s, the early '30s, the late '30s, the early '40s, and the late '40s, and as a result you could actually trace the progress of the early twentieth century in America. From Coolidge to Hoover to FDR; the Crash of 1929 through the Great Depression through the New Deal; the NRA, the [WPA](#) and the [18th Amendment](#); the rise of the Third Reich, the American entry into World War II, and the post-war economic boom.

I would study every cartoon in that book, and as the years went by and I learned more about history, many of them would gradually reveal secret after secret like an Advent calendar.

Damn near everything I know about 20th-century American history I learned from that book. Let's take just one cartoon as an example:



This cartoon appeared in the issue of September 23, 1933. The cartoonist was a man named Gardner Rea (1892-1966), considered the top gag-writer at *The New Yorker* in his day—churning out as many as forty gags a week, most of which he sold for other artists to illustrate. This was a man who had a way with words as well as with a Rapidograph: in his undergrad days at Ohio State University he won both the Serious Poetry award and the Humorous Poetry award—with the same poem. His own artistic style was distinctive, featuring a squiggly line ("I'm sticking to it now so nobody will catch on when I get senile," he claimed) and one or two small patches that were completely inked in black. Although he looked like the punchline in a Charles Atlas ad—5'5" and never more than 90 pounds—he won three varsity letters in his college days, and read twelve languages. After serving in the Chemical Warfare Service during World War I (yeah, we practiced chemical warfare), he moved to New York to teach art classes and, eventually, to meet Harold Ross and become one of the founding madmen of *The New Yorker*.

In this cartoon, Rea portrays some essential facts of his time while employing an equally essential façade—the glitzy production number.

I mentioned the NRA above—how many of you thought I meant the National Rifle Association? C'mon: show of hands! Don't be shy! Well, why wouldn't you? Why would any of you remember the [National Recovery Administration](#), established by FDR to foster employment, set price controls, and harness potentially destructive Depression-era industrial price-gouging? How many of you have noticed the [NRA Blue Eagle](#), thunderbolts in one talon and a cog wheel in the other, under the credits or in the streetscapes of 1930s films? Don't make me ask for a show of hands over how many of you have watched 1930s films! Oh,

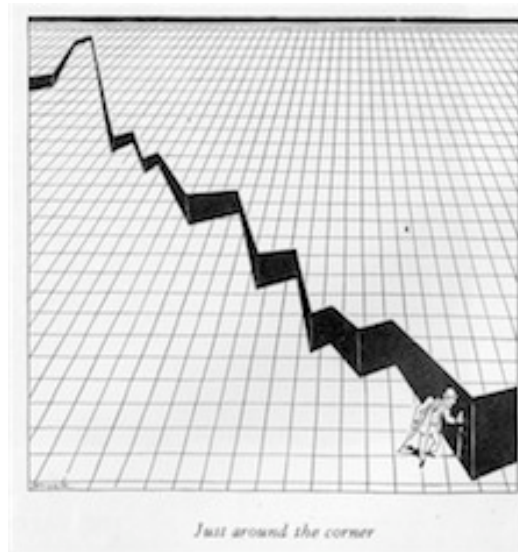
you're gonna break my heart.

Well, I didn't know about the National Recovery Administration when I was living in a southern Michigan suburb in 1966, either. I just knew that this was a big, busy, crazy cartoon with lots of naked women in it and a guy with a Jimmy Durante nose.

Over the years, as my knowledge of the time increased, I was able to appreciate more and more. The guy in the winged tux isn't Jimmy Durante, he's representing the NRA Eagle. The showgirls are spelling out "N R A" with their bodies in the eagle's breast and the sentence they're spelling out on their urns is "We Do Our Part," the NRA motto. This full-page image became a one-page history lesson.

In the caption, one producer says to the other, "There, Morris! If that don't bring prosperity, nothing will." When Herbert Hoover ran for re-election in 1932, one of his campaign slogans was "Prosperity is Just Around the Corner." The *New Yorker* cartoonist, Gardner Rea, evokes both this widely-reviled motto and the similarly surreal musical numbers of the time with his caption. Years later, when I first saw the Busby Berkeley extravaganza, "[Gold Diggers of 1933](#)," the opening number struck an almost identical tone to this New Yorker cartoon (the film had been released four months before this cartoon was published, and was one of the top-grossing films of the year). A very young, pre-Astaire Ginger Rogers sings "[We're in the Money](#)" as scantily-clad chorus girls parade about waving currency (seriously: click through and watch it. You don't want to miss the chorus sung in Pig Latin). Bitter reality steps in as the sheriff's bailiffs invade the production number, shutting down rehearsal because the penniless producer isn't able to pay for the scenery and costumes. There's a bitter reality in Rea's cartoon, as well, although it's not as obvious. Scan the row of chorines trumpeting about industry and waving industrial products: the STEEL girl waves a wrench, the RAILS girl a locomotive engine, the SUITS girl a huge pair of scissors. All the way to the right, cut off by the frame of the cartoon, is a girl holding a banner reading [EUGENICS](#). Sadly, the frame's edge prevents us from seeing what sort of emblem *that* girl is holding. Given that the United States had laws at the time [supporting the forced sterilization of the mentally unfit](#), it's pretty chilling to think of the eugenics-inspired genocide waiting around the corner in Nazi Germany.

But on the surface, Rea's cartoon shimmers with the same false promise as a Busby Berkeley production number, creating a temporary sugary shell for the day's harsh reality and doubtless evoking for readers their memories of Ginger Rogers' song. Alfred Frueh, another early *New Yorker* regular, took a more coldly pragmatic view of the Hoover's promised prosperity.



One senses that, perhaps, Frueh wouldn't have won the Humorous Poetry Award.

But Frueh's cartoon also appeared a good year and a half earlier than Rea's (January 16, 1932), and closer to the time of Hoover's pronouncement. That wound was still fresh.

Political cartoons, or editorial cartoons—of which Frueh's is a good example—don't need my say-so to be considered unpackable texts for history and culture. But Rea's is much more a kind of standard, New Yorker-style cartoon, and in many ways it taught me more over the years than the other. Maybe it's no surprise that I grew up to be an historian?

Image credits:

Scans of cartoons by Gardner Rea and Alfred Frueh are from *The New Yorker 25th Anniversary Collection: 1925-1950*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1951

[Click cartoon for full-sized image](#)

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